

FAULT A PRIMER ON RACE, SCIENCE AND SOCIETY LINES

EDITORS

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“Race” by Any Other Name Would Smell

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“Thank God I am not a ‘coloured’ woman”, was my instinctive reply when asked by a colleague for my response to the Sport Science article. Even as I responded with those words, I heard my father’s voice from 1974 ringing in my ears.

A personal journey

It was a usual weekday morning in 1974 as we drove to school, my parents (both teachers), my sister, her friend and I. My mother got the morning’s conversation going by broaching the subject: “What was your first thought when you woke up this morning?” All of us offered our thoughts, but it was my father’s response that made an indelible mark on my memory: “Thank God I am not a coloured!” Comments such as this, and many other conversations in my home, shaped my consciousness and my views about “race”.

I was at high school during the 1976 uprisings, and on 23 August 1976 fellow students from my school, Athlone High, issued a statement condemning “police brutality, inferior education, segregation laws and the plight of detainees”.¹ I was a teacher at a township school during the 1985 State of Emergency, when our school, along with 453 other schools in the Western Cape, was closed by the then Minister of Education and Culture. We continued teaching in nearby church halls and libraries despite this shutdown by the state. These events, along with a myriad of life

experiences, such as the forced removal from our home under the Group Areas Act in the 1960s and my detention under the 1985 State of Emergency, continued to shape my understandings of “race”.

My thinking about “race” was also deeply influenced by the ideology and teachings of the New Unity Movement (NUM) and its predecessor, the NEUM (Non-European Unity Movement). Through my participation in the NUM, I was introduced to the concept of “non-racialism” and the thinking of founder members such as Ben Kies:

One thing is certain, and that is that mutations in skin-colour, hair texture, shape of nose or skull, and stature, owing to geographical dispersal, isolation and diet, have made not the slightest difference to the biological unity of man as a single species, and provide no scientific basis for a division into what are popularly mis-called “races”.²

Soudien points to the irony of that moment in history. While Kies was influencing thinking on “race” in the 1950s, D.F. Malan and H.F. Verwoerd “were putting in place the architecture and the apparatus for the world’s most devastating racist project – apartheid”.³ The anti-apartheid struggle became for me a struggle against both the concept of “race” as a social construct, as well as a struggle against all forms of racism and, on a more personal level, the total rejection of the term “coloured”, which had been assigned to me at birth by apartheid legislation. It is a position I continued to hold after the 1994 negotiated settlement, much preferring Alexander’s metaphor of the great Gariep River and its many tributaries flowing into the “ocean of humanity” as the symbol of national unity to the idea of a “rainbow nation” of colours existing side-by-side.⁴ So, for me it always was, and still is, just the human race.

Alexander was also influential in shaping my thinking about “race”, as he steadfastly argued that “you cannot fight racial inequality, racial prejudice and race thinking by using racial categories ... fighting race with race is bad social science and even worse practical politics”.⁵ His work offers us alternatives for establishing what has actually caused the disadvantage in a particular domain (like education), such as quality of schooling, income and language. Rather than using “race” as shorthand, he offers a more nuanced class analysis, claiming that “the still large-scale overlapping of ‘race’ and class in South Africa guarantees that no disadvantaged ‘black’ person will fall through the net by virtue of the use of non-racial criteria such as language and income”.⁶ This, too, influenced my understanding of the concept of “race”, by providing a class analysis that located the notion of “race” within a broader social analysis of capitalism. This analysis, articulated so well by Zinn, offers an understanding that links racial discrimination, poverty and capitalism. He argues that “the anti-racist struggle has to be joined with the anti-capitalist struggle”.⁷ These are ideas that have carried through into my practice as an academic developer in higher education and a researcher in the field of higher education studies.

A perspective from the field: Higher education studies

This brings me to how my views on "race" and class intersect with my discipline, higher education, and the field within which I have worked for nearly three decades, academic development. Higher education studies and the subfield of academic development are not fields that an undergraduate student will likely encounter in the course of their studies. However, these fields contribute to a body of knowledge that speaks quite directly to the student experience of higher education. Therefore, the politics of knowledge with respect to "race" and the student experience of the university, as expressed in this field, are critically important.

It is ironic, therefore, that one of the gaps in the literature produced in the field of academic development is the paucity of research on working-class students' experiences of academic development in practice, and whether it has made a difference to their feelings of alienation at universities like Stellenbosch. A recent article addresses this gap, and what it found was that, while some of the working-class students interviewed valued the academic development (AD) interventions offered to them, others saw it as "a painful space that raised critical racial questions regarding who belongs in AD, how they are selected and to what extent they help students or reinforce their institutional marginality".⁸ The researchers in this study call for the problematising of the notion of "previously disadvantaged" (often invoked in the academic development field as a proxy for "race"), as it is used "to refer to black students only".

Academic development as a field has always had a strong social justice agenda in South Africa and has framed its work as widening access to higher education for those who were previously denied access due to some or other form of disadvantage.⁹ The widening of access is generally understood to go beyond formal access to a university education and particular higher education programmes, and to include "epistemological access",¹⁰ which refers to access to knowledge, and to the "goods" of the university. However, much of the research making up the body of knowledge from which academic development draws has been undertaken in "relatively unstable communities"¹¹ of academic developers. Boughey and Niven ascribe this instability to "the temporary conditions of service" under which many academic developers work, as well as "the shifting and uncertain nature of academic development in institutions often due to its uneven, informal funding over the years".¹² As a result, the quantity and quality of such research has been highly uneven and strongly focused on practice-based solutions.

In a cohort study, Scott et al. provide evidence that the system is failing the majority of its students, and it is this failing higher education system that is the field of practice for academic developers.¹³ Elsewhere, Scott raises concerns about

the reliance of the field of academic development on “craft knowledge” approaches to solving the problems of a failing higher education sector.¹⁴ Shay characterises such “craft knowledge” as embodied and developed from years of experience that academic developers have from grappling with complex problems, but without the capacity to explain the very complex problems it is intended to solve.¹⁵ Therefore, the way in which knowledge has been built in the field undermines its transformative agenda. Although it has been underpinned by issues of social justice and a desire to contest the practice of creating separate, add-on classes for “underprepared students” (a proxy for “race”), such practices prevail. So there is clearly a need to shift the research lens beyond individual pedagogical practices to the higher education sector as a whole, and to examine universities as complex social spaces.

In order to analyse how the issue of “race” has influenced practice and thinking within academic development, one needs to trace the development of the field over the past four decades. Its history in South Africa has been well documented.¹⁶ This literature identifies three phases underpinned by sets of ideas (discourses¹⁷) operating in higher education that have powerfully shaped how academic development has progressed. These phases, and the discourses underpinning them, are referred to in the literature as “academic support”, “academic development” and “institutional development”.

The “academic support” discourse is located in a set of ideas that see “disadvantaged students” (another proxy for “race”) as underprepared for higher education. Such students are seen as requiring add-on tutorials, workshops or courses to acquire a ubiquitous set of “skills” that would fill conceptual gaps and improve competence in English. Such initiatives are generally adjunct to the mainstream curriculum. This understanding of academic development work is underpinned by racialised, deficit assumptions about students.

The “academic development” discourse was a response to critiques of the “support” model and it is located in a set of ideas that seeks to move academic development initiatives from the margins to the mainstream. It signals a move away from seeing students as deficient, to a critical examination of teaching and learning in the mainstream curriculum and a focus on academic staff development.

The “institutional development” discourse saw a shift in which academic development practices were influenced by the need for systemic change in South African higher education. This set of ideas was shaped by curriculum renewal in response to the social and economic needs of the country, and an accountability to stakeholders for the quality of the graduates produced by higher education.

The thinking informing these discourses has shaped practices in the field in fundamental ways. How I situated myself in academic development and its prevailing discourses was directly influenced by my own views on "race", which in turn influenced my practices and my research as an academic developer in higher education. When I first started out as a practitioner and a researcher, in 1994, I held a different view to the prevailing notions of academic development.

In the 1990s, academic development, as a field of practice, was responding to the widening of access to higher education for students who had previously been denied access as a result of the social, economic and political policies of the apartheid state. Those traditional notions of academic development generally cast such students in a deficit mode and conceptualised academic development work as an enterprise marginal to the mainstream curriculum, designed to fix such students so that they could succeed in higher education. My view¹⁸ was that academic development work was not about catering for the needs of a racialised group of students, but rather that it should be about designing the social futures of all our students for "cohesive sociality", "new civility" and a more "equitable public realm".¹⁹ While this view of academic development has taken root at a number of institutions in the country, at Stellenbosch University, some 20 years after the "academic support" model of the 1980s was eschewed, this approach still prevails.

In examining the dominant discourses relating to academic development work at Stellenbosch University, one needs to look no further than the way in which the role of academic development centres, such as the Centre for Teaching and Learning, is understood. This centre, as well as others performing an academic development role at the University, are referred to as "support services", or "steundienste" in Afrikaans. It was only after I read an article by Tom Eaton that I truly understood my own abhorrence of the word "support" when used in relation to academic development work:

"Support" is an adult diaper. It's a machine that helps you breathe when you are unconscious. It's a charitable donation to fight a degrading, incurable malady. It's a word so steeped in fatalistic despair that everything it touches instantly becomes a lost cause and therefore awkward at best and repellent at worst.²⁰

So, how does the field of academic development play into how "race" is framed within institutional life at Stellenbosch University? I would argue that the framing of academic development work at Stellenbosch University as "support" has contributed to the feelings of alienation that students, referred to by the institution as BCI (black, coloured, Indian), experience and express through movements such as Open Stellenbosch.

In 2015, at the height of the Fallist movement, Stellenbosch University students expressed their views very publicly about the kind of space the University was for them, how they experienced it, and how this experience impacted on their learning. Below are two student views expressed publicly at the time. The first was expressed in 2015, by then-student Neil du Toit, as a Facebook post on a site titled Bonfiire (established in 2012 and since closed) which claimed to be a space for “rigorous debates on race, language, institutional culture, residence placement policies, and religion”:

The 15th was an awkward day at Stellenbosch. The university locked up the admin building, brought the dogs along, and the VC read off a pre-typed and printed speech ... In my experience the reactions to Open Stellenbosch fall into two categories: those that deny that we have any work to do to fix racism at Stellenbosch, and those that are openly racist.

The second view was expressed by Open Stellenbosch’s then-spokesperson, Sikhulekile Duma, in 2015, on the day after the movement picketed at the inauguration of Professor Wim de Villiers, the current vice-chancellor:

Stellenbosch University is a bubble. A lot of students even happily tell you that they come here so that they can run away from the issues of the country. We want to change that.

The views of these two students suggest that Stellenbosch University needs to interrogate continually whether the spaces within which its students learn are inclusive and welcoming. What is required is a reframing of academic development work. Its current framing as “support” casts the very students for whom such “support” is designed in a deficit mode, much as the Sport Science article casts “coloured” women as having a deficit in their cognitive functioning. This essentialising of students on the basis of “race” is then offered as the reason for their poor academic performance. This kind of racialised thinking locates success in higher education within the scope of particular students, while simultaneously absolving lecturers from critically reflecting on their practices, and the institution from critically reflecting on its systems.

Framing academic development work as “support” suggests an “autonomous” view²¹ of students, locating racialised understandings of “underpreparedness” and “disadvantage” within the students themselves, rather than in the broader social context within which they find themselves. Boughey²² has argued that individualised views of learning and learners are dominant in South Africa, and this is certainly the case at Stellenbosch University. This understanding of learning, also referred to in the literature as decontextualised, constructs students as independent or autonomous from the social contexts in which they were raised, in which they live and in which they learn.

Boughey and McKenna argue that central to this understanding of learning are the ideas that "education is asocial, acultural and apolitical" and that "success in education is dependent on factors inherent to the individual".²³ This understanding has resulted in academic development work at Stellenbosch University taking place separately from the mainstream functioning of the institution, leaving mainstream teaching and learning largely unchanged. The ongoing dominance of this autonomous view of students might be implicated in the feelings of alienation that students expressed through Open Stellenbosch in 2015. Boughey and McKenna argue that the construction of students and their education as asocial, acultural and apolitical, "sits alongside the anger about the rise in fees and decreased state subsidy, broad political instability, and frustrations about ongoing social inequality".²⁴

How, then, does Stellenbosch University move towards being a more inclusive space that better serves the interests of working-class students? I would argue that this requires an analysis that considers factors beyond essentialising categories such as BCI (black, coloured, Indian). This would require a shift away from the dominant asocial, acultural and apolitical construction of learning and learners, towards a class analysis that provides a more social view of learning and learners. Such a social or contextualised view of learning would see students as being shaped by the very contexts in which they were raised, in which they live and in which they learn.

This alternative view would see learning as a socially embedded phenomenon and understand that given the same life chances, all students have the potential to be educated and learn successfully. Such a view would also acknowledge that the socioeconomic context surrounding learning and knowledge construction has a significant impact on successful learning, and that learning and knowledge construction are dependent on the social structures and academic communities to which some students have access, and others do not. Such a view would require of Stellenbosch University to interrogate its context as a social space and examine how it serves to include or exclude students from access to learning and powerful knowledge.

Although teaching and learning have social and individual dimensions that relate to one another, the social context is more complex and nuanced and has a far more profound effect on successful learning than any individual characteristics of students or lecturers. It is in this area that Stellenbosch University can better serve the needs of working-class students. While a "race" analysis pushes academic development work towards individual, autonomous views of education as asocial, acultural and apolitical, a class analysis pushes academic development work towards understandings of the sociopolitical determinants of successful learning and learners in higher education, such as quality of schooling and income. This has implications for practice.

In 2007, Boughey argued that a “third generation” model of academic development practice was needed in South Africa. While the first-generation model was concerned with issues of equity and the second-generation model was concerned with issues of efficiency, Boughey offers a third-generation model of academic development that “marries a concern for equity with a concern for efficiency within an overall framework of a regard for quality”.²⁵ Such a focus on quality would require an approach to student development that moves away from additional generic extended programme courses and classes for racialised groups of students, to a wider institutional strategy that focuses on quality at programme level, and curriculum renewal that is aimed at the transformation of student learning. This signals a shift in focus away from individual students and their perceived deficits and towards academic development practices that are more contextualised within disciplines of study and contribute to “differentiated learning needs at programme level”.²⁶

Some ten years later, Behari-Leak et al. suggest a fourth generation model of academic development that contributes to a “transformative discourse” and “engenders a greater critical social justice worldview within the higher education sector in South Africa”.²⁷ They challenge the field of academic development to respond to “the critique by protesting students that academic development makes hyper-visible the schism between those who can and cannot succeed at the university”.²⁸ They also challenge academic developers to disrupt dominant cultures at universities that continue to marginalise racialised groups of students. This calls for academic developers to seize the “decolonial moment” and position themselves as change agents rather than “bridge builders” and “hand holders”.²⁹

Researching “race”

I now turn to one of the pitfalls that a nonracial perspective can lead to, when poorly understood. When “race” is used as an analytical tool in academic development research, without locating it within a broader sociopolitical analysis that links racial discrimination, poverty and capitalism, an essentialising of “race” takes place, leading to research like the Sport Science article.

Soudien describes the notion of “colour-blindness” as a weak but dominant form of nonracialism, which he refers to as a benign form of multiculturalism. According to Soudien, this position denies “race” and, because its proponents claim not to see “race”, “they deny the possibility that they can be racist”.³⁰ Herein lies the pitfall of such a position, one commonly held by liberals in the academic development movement, who understand their role, in a sometimes patronising way, as being kind to poor, disadvantaged students. This weak form of nonracialism feeds individualised views of learning, constructing students as independent of the social

contexts from which they come, and understanding success in higher education as being dependent on factors inherent to the individual student. Because racism is confined to "the domains of personal behaviour, its power, as a social phenomenon, is not made visible".³¹

Another poor version of nonracialism is what Soudien refers to as "multiracialism". This view, which sees "race" as a form of identity, goes beyond erroneous understandings of "race" as a biological phenomenon. While this understanding was associated with conservatism in the days of the anti-apartheid struggle, it appears to have gained traction in a much more thoughtful and radical form with young South Africans who were born in the late 1980s and after. In my time as a young activist as member of the NUM in the 1980s, the term "coloured" was associated with opportunistic quislings who had stood for office in the racist House of Representatives, which formed part of the notorious Tricameral Parliament of South Africa from 1984 to 1994. However, the manner in which this term has been reclaimed by young South Africans today requires a different engagement from that of the 1980s. In concluding this chapter, I would like to sketch a scenario that demonstrates how the tensions and contradictions surrounding the issue of "race", and particularly the term "coloured", continues to impact the lives of young South Africans well after the euphoria of 1994.

Intergenerational conversations

As mentioned earlier, the anti-apartheid struggle for me was a struggle against the concept of "race" as a social construct, as well as a struggle against all forms of racism occurring in the country. The nonracial perspective I held in the 1980s, and continue to hold today, is that of the total rejection of the term "coloured" in how I choose to identify myself. As the mother of a young South African woman born in 1989 who completed her undergraduate studies at Rhodes University during the first decade of the twenty-first century and her postgraduate studies at UCT during its second decade, I was deeply immersed in her process of reclaiming the term "coloured". As we debated the tensions and contradictions of our respective lived experiences, I came to engage with the notion of "colouredness" in a very different way.

Thirty-odd years later, I was compelled to rethink the views I had held so firmly in the 1980s. Across many conversations with my daughter, who is a writer, about why she considered it important to identify herself as a "coloured" woman in 2019, her arguments covered a number of issues. She pointed out that of the four apartheid racial categories, the label "coloured" was the only one that has been consistently challenged as unacceptable. This she ascribed, in part, to imperialism and the discomfort felt in the United States with the term because of its associations

there, which is quite unrelated to the South African context. Rejecting the term, in her opinion, had two consequences: a second erasure of a culture built in spite of colonialism and racial subjugation, and the denial of even the possibility of reclamation. She mentioned also a sense of pride in the food, the people, the intergenerational overcoming, the language, the rituals, the rites of passage, and the heritage, both erased and rebuilt, often in the margins of society. She spoke of the need to continue to fight for this community, which demographically has the highest percentage of men in prison and the lowest percentage of CEOs in the country.

By refusing validity to the name, and therefore the lexicon that speaks to the specificity of that human experience (words such as *ougat*, *dala* and other phrases that give expression specific to a community), the way that it can play into healing is also removed. She emphasised the need for healing of injury specific to this community: violence, substance abuse and child sexual abuse, which she stated, cannot be healed when “we refuse to acknowledge the ways in which our healing needs to be specific to us”. In her words, “I will not deprive myself of all this because the word does not sit *lekker* in some intellectuals’ mouths.” She identified as a “coloured” woman:

Because I AM a coloured woman. Because I am comfortable with it, fortified by it and driven for it. It isn’t a dirty word for me. It isn’t an imposed word for me. It is a word of immense power and narrative substance. My mother, my grandmother were denied basic human rights for being coloured women, and tossing it aside, when my family and people rise despite it and fall because of it, is an insult to my history.

In her view and life experience, it was “mainly UCT-educated, discourse-insulated elitists” who “have a problem with this word. So the discomfort with it is not representative. And this is telling”.

These understandings are a radical departure from the “proudly coloured” mentality that pervaded the halls of the Tricameral Parliament in the mid-80s. These are views that need to be engaged with even as we debate the kind of research that essentialises “race” and promotes ongoing racist narratives and tropes. The Sport Science article represents just one such study in a long list of similarly racist studies that continue to be conducted in the name of Stellenbosch University. In light of the much-publicised Sport Science article and the many others that did not attract the same amount of attention, there is an urgent need to think anew about what nonracialism might mean in the third decade of the twenty-first century. While I remain unwavering in my total rejection of the term “coloured” in how I choose to identify myself, I have come to realise the importance of, and urgent need for, ongoing intergenerational conversations around issues of representation, the erasure of identity and the silencing of voices.

It is my hope that through such intergenerational conversations we can create new spaces for common meaning-making that move us closer, as a country, to a truly nonracial South Africa. Alexander states that a truly nonracial South Africa is not only conceivable but also eminently feasible.³² To do this, however, he urges us to confront issues of human worth and dignity, and undertake the hard work of bringing back into our paradigms and social analyses "the entire human being and the ways in which human beings can live fulfilled lives". I believe this is possible and it is a goal that shapes the purpose of my life.

Endnotes

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